

CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, SACRAMENTO  
PPA 205: Research in Public Policy and Administration  
Fall 2018

Professor Andrea Venezia  
Classroom: Tahoe 1004  
Day/time: Thursdays from 6-8:50pm

This is a “living document;” I will modify it as needed over the course of the semester.

The best ways to reach me are to come to office hours on Thursdays from 3:45-5:45pm, to email me at [venezia@csus.edu](mailto:venezia@csus.edu), or to schedule a time to meet or talk with me outside of office hours.

## OVERVIEW

Welcome to PPA 205! This course focuses on the kinds of thinking that goes on behind the scenes in order to do rigorous social science research—and in order to determine if the research you’re using is rigorous and sound. While many of you are not researchers, understanding how good research is done will help you determine whether the information you read – from academic journals to mainstream media sources – is sound enough to use for public policy purposes. This is particularly important in an era in which many people get their information from social media. The main goals of this course are to enhance your understanding of how to develop high quality studies related to public policy and administration, and how to “consume” or use them as part of your work. This includes having an understanding of a number of different, common, research approaches, including their potential pitfalls. This course will help prepare you for your thesis, and will hopefully provide you with new analytical lenses for your professional lives as well.

PPA 205 is not primarily a course on data analysis; another core course, PPA 207, focuses on that topic. PPA 205 will set you up for PPA 207, in that you will learn about the power and limitations of a variety of research methods from a conceptual level; that kind of understanding is necessary if you are to conduct rigorous statistical analyses, and if you are to use research effectively and responsibly. Since PPA 207 is focused on quantitative methods, this class focuses on a) the research design decisions and implications that then lead to a decision about which methods to use (qualitative, quantitative, or mixed methods) and b) qualitative methods. Often, quantitative data come from surveys, so it is important to know where the data you consume come from. ***A critical underpinning of this course is that methods are just strategies that are used to collect data; the critical decisions that affect the rigor and generalizability of research come both prior to data collection (during the research design phase) and during data collection.*** You might not understand what this means when you read this syllabi for the first time, but make sure you understand this thoroughly before you finish this course!

Some of the readings in the textbook might seem abstract, although the authors do a great job of providing research-based examples throughout. To help you connect your classroom-based understandings to your world outside of school, I will supplement your textbook readings with articles from newspapers and podcasts. I very much welcome you bringing such resources to the class' attention throughout the course. If you notice a newspaper article that discusses causation, for example, please send me the link or bring the article to class. Let me know if you find an article you wish to share with the class.

Another way that I hope you will connect the readings and class discussions to your out-of-school lives is to have you make components of a toolkit throughout the semester. The different pieces of the toolkit will help you prepare for 207 and for your thesis, and could likely help you at work as well. Even if you do not end up using, the survey or interview/focus group protocol that you developed, the act of creating the tools will help you apply what you've read in the context of a current issue, and it will help you think about social science topics that interest you. The components of the toolkit are listed in the course assignments section of this syllabus.

#### SPECIFIC LEARNING GOALS

<b>At the end of PPA 205 it is expected that students will:</b>
Understand the importance of thinking systematically about how to answer social science questions, including understanding the advantages and limitations of different research designs and methods.
Understand the advantages and limitations of using different ways to collect data, such as via experiments, surveys, interviews, and focus groups.
Work effectively in groups.
Frame and present problems effectively to different audiences.
Write effectively for different audiences.
Understand the difference between analysis and advocacy.

From a big picture perspective, when you finish this course, I hope you will be able to be excellent and ethical consumers and/or producers of research. This class will help you understand how to identify issues that you might want to study, how to ask the right questions to study the issues, how to design a way to answer the questions, and how to gather data to answer those questions. On the flip side, understanding those issues will help you ask the right questions about information that you use on a daily basis—to question biases and to understand limitations. You will hopefully leave the course with a new perspective about the power and limitations of research, and of information in the public domain. You should understand how and why people design research and the importance of the “front end” (design) of research, the effects each stage of the research process has on the data we collect, and how we can interpret and use the information generated by the research. You should understand the basic principles that all kinds of methods — how we go about

collecting and analyzing data — have in common and how to think systematically about investigating social science issues.

## CONDUCT OF THE COURSE AND COURSE POLICIES

This course differs from traditional research methods courses in that a relatively heavy emphasis is placed on applying what you learn and on classroom discussion. Simply listening to a lecture will not help you engage with and learn the concepts. Accordingly, a typical class will include discussion topics that are specified in the syllabus. Many class sessions will also use exercises; I will create some exercises, borrow some from previous PPA instructors, and use exercises from Approaches to Social Research (called simply “Approaches” throughout this syllabus). It is therefore imperative that you read the syllabus carefully to be prepared for class and to complete the readings and assignments before class.

**Getting help.** It is important that you understand the material we are covering in class. The class is structured as a series of building blocks. You don’t want to miss a foundational piece. If for any reason, you do not understand the readings, it is essential that you gain clarity on the topic *during the time in which we are covering those topics*. You can speak up in class to ask for clarification or you can speak with me privately (via email, phone, in office hours, by appointment, or during class breaks). I also encourage to seek help from your classmates. I am best reached via email, and I will get back to emails sent between Monday and Thursday within 48 hours.

**Students with disabilities.** Should you need assistance with portions of class due to disabilities, please let me know as soon as possible. The University offers services to student with disabilities and I would be glad to refer you to the appropriate campus unit.

**Missing class.** I expect students to attend all class sessions unless they have a compelling reason not to do so. You should notify me in advance if you need to miss a class. Except under very unusual circumstances, a student who misses three classes will be penalized one entire grade (e.g., a A- for the course will become a B-), and a student who misses more than three classes will receive a failing grade.

**Late assignments.** I will not accept late assignments (or allow for a make-up) unless a student experiences a highly unusual circumstance (and talks with me ahead of time, unless missing an assignment was due to an unforeseen emergency; a competing requirement for another class is **not** a compelling reason). At my discretion, I might allow a student who misses a deadline to make up an assignment. Whether a student who does a make-up could still earn full credit for the assignment depends on the situation. If there is not a compelling reason, I will not accept late assignments. Unless otherwise specified, homework is due by 5pm on the assigned class day and must be time stamped as such (via email). ***Please use Microsoft Word for all assignments so that I can edit them electronically.***

**Re-writes.** I encourage you to come to office hours and/or email me to get advice about homework assignments. I hope that you will learn the material well and demonstrate that by doing well on the assignments, and I am here to help you. My goal is for you to meet or exceed the class objectives and I understand that that sometimes requires re-doing work. I do not, however, have the time to let everyone re-write every assignment; that takes a lot of work to grade and I would then not be prompt in returning anyone's papers. Since I created the class as a series of building blocks, it is important for you to receive timely feedback, since that will affect your ability to do the next assignment. Therefore, I will decide upon re-writes on a case-by-case basis and will limit those opportunities, so please do your best the first time around.

**Distractions.** Please do not use cell phones or surf the web in class. I realize that it can be hard to focus on one issue at a time, but that is required in class—do not multi-task. I know that some people take notes electronically so that you can access them easily later. I trust that you will not quickly check email or social media during class. But I know that life happens 24/7 and many of us are juggling a lot. If you are experiencing a family emergency—if, for example a loved one is sick or in the hospital—and you are awaiting a phone call, let me know at the beginning of class that you are awaiting an emergency call, silence your phone, and step into the hall if the call comes in during class. If anyone abuses the use of electronic devices in class, I will prohibit their use for all.

**Academic Honesty.** I take plagiarism and other acts of academic dishonesty very seriously. I reserve the right to fail students who are academically dishonest. Note that academic dishonesty can be grounds for dismissal from the university. Details are available at the University Policy Manual found at <http://www.csus.edu/umannual/student/UMA00150.htm>. Plagiarism is one case of academic dishonesty, and here is an excerpt from the manual on plagiarism:

Plagiarism: Plagiarism is a form of cheating. At CSUS plagiarism is the use of distinctive ideas or works belonging to another person without providing adequate acknowledgement of that person's contribution. Regardless of the means of appropriation, incorporation of another's work into one's own requires adequate identification and acknowledgement. Plagiarism is doubly unethical because it deprives the author of rightful credit and gives credit to someone who has not earned it. Acknowledgement is not necessary when the material used is common knowledge. Plagiarism at CSUS includes but is not limited to:

1. The act of incorporating into one's own work the ideas, words, sentences, paragraphs, or parts thereof, or the specific substance of another's work without giving appropriate credit thereby

representing the product as entirely one's own. Examples include not only word-for-word copying, but also the "mosaic" (i.e., interspersing a few of one's own words while, in essence, copying another's work), the paraphrase (i.e., rewriting another's work while still using the other's fundamental idea or theory); fabrication (i.e., inventing or counterfeiting sources), ghost-writing (i.e., submitting another's work as one's own) and failure to include quotation marks on material that is otherwise acknowledged; and

2. Representing as one's own another's artistic or scholarly works such as musical compositions, computer programs, photographs, paintings, drawing, sculptures, or similar works.

If you are unclear about what constitutes plagiarism, it is your responsibility to educate yourself at the beginning of the semester and/or come talk with me.

## READINGS

The following book is required and may be purchased at the Hornet Bookstore: Royce A. Singleton, Jr., and Bruce C. Straits. Approaches to Social Research, 5<sup>th</sup> Edition. New York: Oxford University Press, 2010. The 6<sup>th</sup> edition is available and you are welcome to get it, but it's 2-3 times the cost of the 5<sup>th</sup> edition and that's not worth it to me. I will use the 5<sup>th</sup> edition and all the references I made to exercises and page numbers will be from that edition.

Additionally, I will make shorter readings available via hard copy or SacCT, or I will hand them out in class.

## SUMMARY OF ASSIGNMENTS

**Please note: I am assigning readings and a paper before the first day of class.**

Completing some reading before class starts will jump start the class into a productive discussion, and it will leave more time in the middle and end of the course for applied exercises and discussions. Writing a short paper prior to calls allows me to understand a bit about each of you so that I can meet you each where you are and then help move your understandings/thinking forward. (This is called formative assessment and is a research method.)

I redesigned the course significantly since I last taught it in 2014—and it will be very different than it was in 2017. My focus for the redesign was on making sure that you each will leave this class with the ability to develop instruments that you can use for your thesis and at work. It is surprisingly difficult to do that, and it takes multiple iterations of an instrument to ensure that it will answer your question(s), it is free of biases, people will engage with it, and you can make sense of the information you get from it. I run a center that does this kind of research all the

time; we work in teams to create instruments and it can take weeks to complete an instrument that meets our quality criteria. I cannot grade multiple drafts of multiple instruments from each of you; if I did that, the class would have to span a year. Therefore, I will ask that you work in teams around a specified research question(s), but that each of you take the lead on writing a section of each instrument. That is how I would expect this kind of work to be done at work. No researcher I know works in isolation from others when doing qualitative research. I expect the entire group to weigh in on each section, and I encourage you to be critical friends across groups, but I want each of you to have the experience of writing a section from scratch yourselves, individually. I will provide feedback on each section, but the instrument will receive one grade. Each group will have a sister/brother group with which it will be paired; those groups will administer the instruments to each other.

Your toolkit will be comprised of:

- **A glossary of terms.** This will not be graded. To ensure that you are ready to succeed in PPA 207, I will hand out a glossary template with terms that you will need to know for the spring semester. This is for your reference. You will not turn it in for a grade, but I highly suggest that you check it weekly and fill out the terms as you learn them. Please bring it to each class.
- **A running chart of pros, cons, uses, and challenges/limitations of each method discussed in class.** This will not be graded. This chart will be a “cheat sheet” for you next semester when you are thinking about which methods to use for your theses and how to discuss the pros and cons of the method(s) you select. Please bring it to each class.
- **A list of research questions that your group is interested in exploring, along with your thoughts about hypotheses connected to those questions.** You will work with your team to come up with a research question(s) for the semester. Since rigorous and sound instruments depend upon a thorough understanding of the literature, your group will want to spend a couple of hours getting to know the key issues related to your topic of interest—and calibrating your understanding of those issues with your group—but writing a sound literature review is not part of this class. Use a cursory search of the literature to generate a list of themes, variables, or topics related to your question. You will then use those when you develop your instruments.
- **Survey instrument.** Your group will develop a survey instrument to gather data to answer your research question. You will need to create a list of themes (sections) for an outline of the instrument and each person will be responsible for writing at least one section. Your questions should be unbiased, not leading, not multi-faceted (no double or triple barreled questions!), tailored for the right audience(s), etc., and they should yield

- answers that should be fairly easy to analyze. This means you will have to have sparing use of open-ended questions—but I want each survey to have at least one open-ended question so that you gain the experience of coding (analyzing) that information. Pay attention to how long the survey would like take someone to complete; aim for no longer than 15 minutes. You will then be responsible for administering the survey to members from another group.
- **An interview protocol** (list of questions). You will need to create a list of themes (sections) for an outline of the instrument and each person will be responsible for writing at least one section. Your questions should be unbiased, not leading, not multi-faceted (no double or triple barreled questions!), tailored for the right audience(s), etc. Your protocol should flow in such a way that it will be engaging for the interviewees—so that it creates a narrative through the discussion of the questions. Pay attention to how long it would likely take to use the interview protocol; aim for no longer than 45 minutes. You will then be responsible for administering the interview protocol to members from another group. You will need to assign one person to be the interviewer and the other people will be note takers. Everyone will use those notes for their final paper, so the notes need to capture everything, including quotes.
  - **A focus group protocol** (list of questions to use for a group interview/discussion). You will need to create a list of themes (sections) for an outline of the instrument and each person will be responsible for writing at least one section. Your questions should be unbiased, not leading, not multi-faceted (no double or triple barreled questions!), tailored for the right audience(s), etc. Your protocol should flow in such a way that it will be engaging for the interviewees—so that it creates a narrative through the discussion of the questions. Moreover, for a focus group, you will need to focus on encouraging interaction between participants of the group; that is the benefit of a focus group versus an interview. Since there will be more than one person participating, you'll also want to be sure that you don't say or ask anything that could make someone feel uncomfortable or stigmatized in front of the others. Pay attention to how long it would likely take to administer the focus group; aim for no longer than 45 minutes. Your group will then be responsible for administering the interview protocol to members from another group. You will need to assign one person to conduct the focus group and another person as notetaker. Everyone will use those notes for their final paper, so the notes need to capture everything, including quotes.
  - **A coding template** (to make sense of the qualitative data).
  - **Individual paper based on your findings from the research.** While this might seem redundant—to have each person write a separate paper based

on the research you do as a group—I really want each of you to have the experience of making sense of qualitative data. It is a bit mind numbing at times and it takes time. This will help you understand what you consume better, and it will help you decide if you want to include qualitative methods in your thesis. You will analyze the survey results and analyze the data from the interview and focus group notes. Since the analysis part is the focal point of this assignment, it does not need to be long. The paper needs to be in two parts: one with the findings framed for policymakers and one with the findings reframed for another audience of your choosing. Please keep the paper to six or fewer pages. Make sure to use graphics as relevant (such as pie charts or chi square tables to display survey findings). Finally, add a paragraph, on a separate page, reflecting on what it was like to reframe the findings for another audience. It will be interesting to see if people within a group had different findings.

- **Individual reflection on key learnings from the class.** Since this will be part of your toolkit, this should focus on the issues that you want to keep in mind when you start your thesis writing/research process. This assignment will serve a secondary objective—to help me see what resonated for people.

I will also consider your class participation in your final grade. In assessing participation, I will take into account class attendance, quality of comments in class discussion, extent to which connections are made to course readings and concepts, and frequency of involvement.

#### LIST OF ALL ASSIGNMENTS, DUE DATES, AND GRADING WEIGHTS

Final class grades will be determined in accordance with the following weights (remember, there are other, ungraded, assignments, so this is not an exhaustive list of assignments):

- Individual “pre-class” paper 5% **due August 24 by 10am**
- Research questions, hypotheses, and audience(s) 10% **due by September 13 at 5pm**
- Survey 15% **due by October 4 at 5pm**
- Interview protocol 15% **due by October 11 at 5pm**
- Focus group protocol 15% **due by October 18 at 5pm**
- Individual paper based on findings from research 20% **due by November 29 at 5pm**
- Individual reflection on key learnings **due by December 6 at 5pm**
- Class participation 10% (this includes completing exercises from Approaches to be discussed and sometimes turned in during class)



I use a 100 point scale, so each assignment is worth the number of points as its weight (the survey is 15% of your grade and worth 15 points); here is the grading table:

<b>Letter Grade</b>	<b>Percent Grade</b>
A	93-96
A-	90-92
B+	87-89
B	83-86
B-	80-82
C+	77-79
C	73-76
C-	70-72
D+	67-69
D	65-66
E/F	Below 65

#### CLASS SCHEDULE

##### **Class 1: August 30**

**Part I: Introduction to the course and to each other, selection of group topics and groups**

**Part II: Why Does Good Research Design Matter in Our Lives?**

##### Readings:

Read Chapters 1 and 2 of Approaches prior to the first day of class.

##### Homework:

Write **1-2 single-spaced pages** about the following: what you hope to learn in terms of being a good *consumer* of research and what you hope to learn to become a good *producer* of research. Describe any experience you have being a consumer and/or producer of research, and discuss your policy area(s) of interest. Finally, please read the Table of Contents in Approaches and, in your paper, include any questions you have for me about the issues we will discuss over the course of the semester. There is no grade for this assignment. Your paper will help me understand where you are each starting from with regard to your understanding of the broad issues and concepts discussed in the textbook, and it will help you become grounded in some of the key introductory issues for this class. **Please email your paper to me by 10am on August 24.**

Exercises and Discussion:

Introductions, etc.

Be prepared to discuss exercises 1 and 3 from Chapter 2 in class.

We will spend time brainstorming about and selecting topics for group research projects, and you will select into a group. Groups will be responsible for developing interview and focus group protocols (instruments) and a survey instrument and will use each other as project teams—both for conducting interviews, focus groups, and surveys, and for doing the analytical work together to make sense of what you learned. Groups will be paired with another group and will administer instruments across groups.

**Class 2: September 6      Scientific Approaches and Ethics**

Readings:

1) re-read/skim Chapter 2; 2) Chapter 3 in Approaches; and 3) an article on vaccines and autism located at:

<http://www.theglobeandmail.com/life/health-and-fitness/from-the-2011-archive-medical-fraud-revealed-in-discredited-vaccine-autism-study/article621543/>

Exercises and Discussion:

Complete exercises 1a-1c on pages 75-76 in Approaches and be prepared to discuss them in class.

**Class 3: September 13      Designing Research: What Do You Need to Think About First?**

Readings:

1) Chapter 4 in Approaches, 2) “Does This Ad Make Me Fat?” New York Times article available at:

[http://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/10/opinion/sunday/does-this-ad-make-me-fat.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/10/opinion/sunday/does-this-ad-make-me-fat.html?_r=0), and 3) article on medical diagnostics available at: <http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2013/03/24/magazine/diagnosis-wobbly-walk.html#/#possible>.

Homework:

Group research questions, hypotheses, and intended audience(s) due.

In-class:

You will complete an in-class assignment about causation. We'll also talk about problem definition.

**Class 4: September 20      Understanding causality and the thinking behind  
“gold star” research (randomized trials)**

Reading:

Henry E. Brady, “Data-Set Observations versus Causal-Process Observations: The 2000 Presidential Election,” in Brady and David Collier, *Rethinking Social Inquiry* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2004).

Article:

[https://www.theatlantic.com/family/archive/2018/06/marshmallow-test/561779/?utm\\_source=atfb](https://www.theatlantic.com/family/archive/2018/06/marshmallow-test/561779/?utm_source=atfb)

Homework, Exercises, and Discussion:

Think carefully about Brady’s article about the Florida results in the 2000 presidential election. What may we miss by moving right to regression analysis and ignoring the logic of causal processes?

**Class 5: September 27      Survey research**

Readings:

1) Chapters 5 and 6 in Approaches; 2) Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2011), pp. 109-118, and 3) How to Lie With Education Data Parts I and II available at: <http://chronicle.com/blogs/data/2014/07/15/how-to-lie-with-education-data-part-1/> (the link to Part II is at the bottom of Part I).

Exercises and Discussion:

Complete exercise 5 on page 148 and exercise 4 on page 190 and be prepared to talk about them in class. From the Kahneman article: What does Kahneman indicate about the danger of jumping to conclusions based on “small N” samples? What does this suggest about the desirability of “large N” studies?

Andrea to hand out anonymized examples of pre-/post-interview and focus group instruments (with and without edits).

**Class 6: October 4      Interviews**

Readings:

Chapter 7 in Approaches and 2) Listen to 30 minutes of Forum on KQED from July 12, 2013 about cholesterol available at:  
<http://www.kqed.org/a/forum/R201307120900>.

Homework:

Survey instrument due.

Exercises and Discussion:

Be prepared to meet with your paired group to discuss your surveys. Bring copies of your surveys to share. Be prepared to talk about exercises 2, 3, and 4 from pages 228-229 in Approaches.

**Class 7: October 11                  Focus groups**

Readings:

1) Chapters 9-10 in Approaches and 2) Floyd Jackson Fowler, Jr., "How Unclear Terms Affect Survey Data," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 56 (1992): 218-231.

Homework:

Interview protocol due. Revise survey.

Exercises and Discussion:

Be prepared to meet with your paired group to discuss your interview protocols. Bring copies of your protocol to share. Consider the types of wording issues raised in the Fowler piece. What might these imply about how a researcher should proceed to determine the extent of television viewing among present day American teenagers?

Complete exercise 3 on page 308 and 4 on 352 (both are in Approaches) and be prepared to talk about them in class.

**Class 8: October 18                  Review, integration of concepts (mixed methods), possible movie night using movie that demonstrates good research**

Readings:

For this class, there is no reading. Listen to the following This American Life podcast: <http://thisamericanlife.org/radio-archives/episode/490/trends-with-benefits>. Think about the issues we have discussed so far in class related to this story (such as the role of theory in trying to understand public policy issues, the impact of public policies, collecting information to answer social policy issues) and be prepared to talk about them in class.

Homework:

Focus group protocol due. Revise interview protocol.

In-class:

Be prepared to meet with your paired group to discuss your focus group protocol. Bring copies of your protocol to share. Film for Viewing in Second Part of Class “All the President’s Men” (1976)  
We will watch about half of the film in class.

**Class 9: October 25                      Consuming information and applying what you’ve learned**

Readings:

1) Chapter 11 in Approaches, 2) Chapter 13 in Approaches, 3) *One Shot Deal*, and 4) *Betraying the College Dream*

Homework:

Revise focus group protocol.

In-class:

Why do you think my colleagues and I chose a field work approach to examine how community college students understood assessment and placement? What did we learn from this approach that we probably could not have learned from statistical analysis of available data? What were the weaknesses of this approach?

Why do you think we selected the methods we used in *Betraying the College Dream*? What strengths did each method bring? What are the limitations of each method?

Do you look at research differently now than you did prior to starting this class? If so, how so?

**Class 10: November 1                      Cross-group time to administer your instruments**

You will spend this night administering all the instruments with your partner group. I encourage you to create a timeline regarding your analytical work to make sure you have time to complete the analyses and writing in time for the final paper deadline. Make sure you have clear roles for people (transcriber, interviewer, etc.).

**Class 11: November 8      Making sense of qualitative data**

Tonight, we will talk about the rigorous processes you should use to make sense of the data you collected, including calibrating your processes across your team. You will make coding templates. You will have group time to start doing that work.

**Class 12: November 15      Evaluation—guest speaker: Shannon Williams from ISR**

Readings:

Chapter 14 from Approaches

**November 22                      No class \*\*\*THANKSGIVING BREAK\*\*\***

There will be no class this week.

**Class 13: November 29      Class starts with group time to discuss main findings and to share out about similarities and differences.**

Final individual papers due.

**Class 14: December 6      \*\*\*LAST DAY OF CLASS\*\*\***

Revisiting research ethics in light of everything you have learned, course wrap-up. Possibly ask current students to visit to talk about thesis process.

Final reflections due.

Time for student evaluations.